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# Croce as Shakespearean Critic

BY

J. M. ROBERTSON

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## CROCE AS SHAKESPEAREAN CRITIC

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# Croce as Shakespearean Critic

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## CROCE AS SHAKESPEAREAN CRITIC

## I

It is perhaps not wholly advantageous to Signor Benedetto Croce to be introduced to new English readers as he is in the preface to Mr. Douglas Ainslie's translation of his *Ariosto, Shakespeare e Corneille*, with the proclamation that the essay on Shakespeare is "so original and so profound that it will serve as guide to generations yet unborn," and that the three essays "should inaugurate everywhere a new era in literary criticism." We are all ready to grant to Mr. Ainslie that he "blows for Hector"; and Croce really did not need such a heralding blast to secure our respectful attention. Mr. Ainslie, in fact, would have better served his eminent Master by a closer attention to the business of translating him. That he has done that well in the past he has, he tells us, Croce's assurance. But there are several places in the present rendering in which he makes his author talk nonsense; and the first duty of one who criticises the book in its English dress is to save the author from the possible consequences of those misrenderings. A reader satisfied of Mr. Ainslie's trustworthiness might decline to be impressed by the ability of a critic who could write :

" The mode of procedure [of certain champions of Corneille] is to deny what is evident, for example that Corneille argues through the mouths of his characters, *instead of* expressing and setting in action *his own mode of feeling*, in such a way as the situation would require, *were they poetically treated.*"

The student of Croce will at once feel that such a countersense is not in Croce's way, and, turning to the original, will find, as he expects, that Croce wrote clear sense. *Il proprio sentire* means here, not "*his own* mode of feeling," but that of the dramatic personage, *the* mode of feeling *proper* to the dramatic situation; and it is embarrassing for one who has no pretension to Mr. Ainslie's knowledge of Italian to have to point it out. Again and again the English reader will have to realise that in this translation by a good Italian scholar the author's meaning has gone by the board through sheer inadvertence on the translator's part. We shall have occasion to dispute with Signor Croce on some important issues, and even to charge him with vital self-contradiction, but never to impute sheer non-sense.

## II

The reputation that has been won by Signor Croce may be said to have been earned by the union of a keen zest for sheer truth with high capacity to reach and disengage it; and these merits are admitted to mark his work alike in philosophy, economics and æsthetics. Students of Shakespeare, therefore, may look hopefully to him for a newly critical survey of their problems; and it may cordially be said that in this volume he well repays them for a reading. Over and above his keen appreciation of the main body of Shakespeare's work, which is in itself a noteworthy testimony, he has done vigorous "fundamental brain-work" on some of the critical problems set up by the total attempt of the last century to know Shakespeare. His results, it is true, are largely

negative, but to a considerable extent they are quite firm. One is, that the "German" method of reaching a positive statement of Shakespeare's philosophy of things by sheer deduction from an *à priori* theorem of his *purpose* in any or every play is critically and philosophically worthless, in that it rests upon no valid induction. This general verdict, summarily reached long ago by multitudes of unpretending English students, Croce effectively substantiates. He might perhaps have strengthened his rebuttal by dwelling on the evidence for the determination of choice of play-themes by the sheer business needs of the theatre—the need for plays that would "draw" as against any indulgence to the didactic proclivities shown by a dramatist like Jonson. But Croce's rejection of the general *à priori* method of the Gervinus-Ulrici school or schools is adequately made out. Less decisively perhaps, but still cogently, he impugns the practice of connecting the "practical" with the "poetic" personality by all manner of psychological presuppositions, and especially by speculative inferences as to the poet's personal experience. In this connection he is particularly severe on Brandes—more so than he is on Mr. Frank Harris, to whom he is comparatively indulgent while rejecting his theorem. The sufficient dismissal of the mass of conjecture in question is that whether any given guess be found plausible or not, "nothing can be done with it" *qua* guess; and it can as such form no part of an agreed æsthetic judgment of the Shakespearean performance.

The mere statement of these negative results, however, elicits the reflection that not merely are they in no

sense innovating positions, pointing to a new era in criticism, but they impinge on a problematic area of æsthetic criticism where Croce himself at times sets foot, and where, in fact, æsthetic appreciation is always tending to prospect. The thought, for instance, that Constance's lament for Arthur may tell of the poet's suffering for the loss of his own boy ("one of his sons," Mr. Ainslie without warrant makes his author say), is an old one, is "pre-German," and is indeed incapable of complete banishment from the field of critical reflection. What the judicial critic is bound to say is that the poet presumably could have "felt for" Constance as he did *without* having suffered the same bereavement: else why should so many of us, irrespective of such personal experience, recognise the fine fitness of the utterance? But not only are there cases where the guess cannot be thus simply disposed of, remaining persistently in the outskirts of our estimate: Croce himself from time to time offers negative and positive judgments, not as contingent inferences, but as biographical, "practical," personal facts deducible from the poetic material which he declares to be incommensurable with the practical. Some of these postulates suggest the unrevised pronouncements of different moods, as when, after saying (p. 149) that "Shakespeare is not a philosopher: his spiritual tendency is *altogether opposed to the philosophical*, which dominates both sentiment and the spectacle of life with thought that understands and explains it," he argues (p. 252), as against some who pronounce HAMLET the most philosophical of the tragedies, that "strictly speaking" there is not any *more*

of philosophy in *HAMLET* than in the other plays; and yet again avows (pp. 159-160) that "nevertheless" Shakespeare "has assumed in the past and sometimes assumes *even in our eyes* the appearance of a philosopher and a master." The simple fact is that Shakespeare, like other poets, is not a philosopher *qua* poet, since poetry as such is something essentially incommensurate with philosophy, but that "nevertheless," so far from being "opposed" to the philosophical tendency, he has more of it than almost any other great poet ever had, whether or not he meets Croce's questionable definition.

But we have more concrete dissonances than this. Let us contrast, for instance, the critic's severe dismissal of Brandes with his own confident conclusions as to Shakespeare's total or ultimate outlook on life. The commentary of Brandes is so often categorical where it should be conditional, and so often founded on false or doubtful data, that Croce's general hostility may be reckoned salutary. Notably, when Brandes dismisses *MACBETH* as lacking in psychic interest in respect that it does not for him connect with what he holds to be the personality of Shakespeare, the Crocean retort is as just as it is severe. Brandes has formed for himself an ideal of Shakespeare as a publicist, and where he can see no trace of the propagandist aim that he expected to find he uncritically disparages as uninteresting what disinterested judgment recognises as masterly work. But it is possible to be unjust to Brandes even where he is "Teutonic" in his imposition of a surmise as a truth. His persistent attempt to picture Shakespeare as reading his own experience into his characters is indeed fitly to

be judged as a vending of conjecture which cannot be translated into certainty. But even conjectures have their measure of appeal, as such; and it is fair to note the grounds given for them even when dismissing them as unverifiable. When, then, Brandes urges, generally, that the dramatist conceives his characters by, so to speak, putting himself in their skins; and, particularly, that Shakespeare conceives Richard III by a measure of sympathy with him as one publicly contemned, he is after all putting an æsthetic speculation that is not so devoid of "interest" as Croce says it is. The most important comment would indeed be that Brandes has far too readily taken for granted that Shakespeare planned and penned RICHARD III, giving no heed to the old surmise that it was drafted by Marlowe. But, if we assent as Croce apparently does to its inclusion in Shakespeare's work, a speculation as to how he approached his conception has some interest. Brandes's idea is that, setting out with the conception of Richard as exasperated by the world's disrespect for him as a hunchback, Shakespeare could the more easily "get into his skin," because he, as actor, had known what it was to suffer from heartless public contempt. Once more, the critical verdict would be that it did not really need such an experience to capacitate him for the measure of sympathy imputed. But Croce retorts by censuring Brandes for "such statements as that Richard III, the deformed dwarf, whom we feel to be superior in intellect, *adumbrates* Shakespeare himself, obliged to adopt the despised profession of the actor, but full of the pride of genius"; and this does not really tell us what Brandes

is driving at. The censor is indeed quite entitled to say that the conjecture is arbitrary; though one does not see why he need add "devoid of interest." A little scope may normally be allowed to irrelevance, as when we assent to the "Evviva l'Italia!" with which Mr. Ainslie opens his "translator's preface" to a work that has nothing to do with politics.

Somewhat more serious, and more to our purpose, is Croce's censure of Brandes (p. 305) and others "who examine what are called the 'historical plays,' and because they are 'historical' compare them with the history books, blaming the poet for not having given to Cæsar the part which should have been his in *JULIUS CÆSAR*, and quoting in support of their argument (like Brandes) the histories of Mommsen and of Boissier." This seems essentially unfair. It is not merely by way of impeaching Shakespeare that Brandes quotes Mommsen and Boissier: he argues, and with truth, that our play does not do justice to Cæsar as presented in Plutarch, its main source. Here again, there are two critical answers to Brandes, who oddly upsets his own case by declaring, in just but supererogatory censure of the Baconians, that Shakespeare did injustice to Cæsar for sheer lack of historical knowledge. On Brandes's own showing, sufficient knowledge for the main purpose was given in North's Plutarch; and, further by his own showing, the learned Jonson was wholly hostile to Cæsar. And these circumstances might fitly have set Brandes asking whether there is no weight in Fleay's theory of a Jonsonian compression of two Cæsar plays into one, or even whether *JULIUS CÆSAR* is wholly or originally from

Shakespeare's hand. But even self-contradiction should not be reckoned irremediable; and to charge Brandes (as does Croce) with condemning Shakespeare for lacking our modern knowledge of Roman history, is not to do him justice. The issue in regard to *JULIUS CÆSAR* has a strictly æsthetic importance which Croce seems to miss. As Brandes expressly puts it, the "poetic value" of the play suffers from the belittling of Cæsar.

And this brings us not only to the companion issue as to Croce's own positive estimates, but to the most important critical problem raised by his book, the problem, namely, of the relevance of questions of source and authenticity to that æsthetic criticism or estimate of the poetic mass which he seems to treat as not merely the ultimate but the only serious task of the critic. It is precisely because we agree with him that the biographic and the æsthetic subject-matters are "incommensurable" that some of us are concerned to criticise the practical use to which he puts that postulate. Incommensurable data, as he seems in one place (p. 119) to admit, can have a cross-bearing on inferences drawn from their respective series; and it seems to some of us fairly obvious that any comprehensive æsthetic estimate of Shakespeare is conditioned by agreement on the data as to what *is* Shakespeare. Croce, in effect, takes the course of ruling out a mass of concrete problems as being insusceptible of certain solution, while offering us a number of certainties of his own that have not even gone through the process of challenge. It would seem to follow that his critical method, with all its merits, is at important points open to revision.

## III

One of the positions put by Croce, without reserve, unconditionally, is that HAMLET is a "tragedy of the will," in which "the obstacle arises from the very bosom of the will." This might conceivably imply a view of Hamlet's task as one which necessarily paralysed the will to action in any highly percipient mind—a view of the tragedy which, going deeper than Werder's vain formula of mere objective difficulty, might be claimed to improve greatly on the familiar account of the hero as incapable of decision. But while some such wider idea might seem to be implicit in the closing paragraph of Croce's section on "The Tragedy of the Will" (see also p. 229), the rest of the section appears to proceed on the ordinary view; and the expression: "What was perdition for Hamlet" appears to posit in the usual way weakness in him, not fatality in the external situation. Now, this view is brought under challenge in the question as to whether or not Shakespeare's Hamlet is of his own projection or is but a manipulation of a previous construction, and largely conditioned by that. Croce, we infer, would answer that no opinion on that head should be allowed to affect our judgment of the play, because on such a point we cannot reach certainty. But is not that very position, one asks, an avowal that we cannot have any *other* certainty as to what was in Shakespeare's mind in shaping the play? If the challenge is merely dismissed as not reducible to certainty, is not the view challenged avowedly left open to doubt? To what certainty can the critic himself honestly pretend, when the issue has been fully faced?

The affirmative certainties of the critic take some other forms. In a highly interesting series of discussions of Shakespeare's poetic or literary relation to questions of religion he reaches conclusions which will probably perturb some English readers, and will be by them impugned as mere "conjectures," with distinct support from some of his own concessions (p. 153). But when he writes (p. 141) that "Shakespeare caressed no ideals of any sort, and least of all political ideals," we are all bound, even if we agree with him, to point out this is an inference incapable of full proof, were it only because it is so comprehensive a negative. And what more of critical right can the critic have to such a wholesale positive-negative conviction than any of us have to a negative view on some of his positive verdicts? In a finely-felt commentary on *LEAR* he writes that "an infinite hatred for deceitful wickedness has inspired this work": a proposition which might perhaps elicit triumphant smiles in those German shades which he has been shelling. But from any standpoint, is not the ascription of an ethically felt "infinite hatred" an implication of positive ideals? Elsewhere, our critic supports the view that Shakespeare transcends (*surpasses* is Mr. Ainslie's, here literal, rendering of the original) questions of good and evil by treating them simply as facets of life.

Without seeking merely to convict Croce of inconsistency, by way solely of indicating that æsthetic criticism has its snares like every other, we may note the dilemma in which he places himself by his judgment (p. 294: cp. 219) that *CORIOLANUS* "lacks complete internal justification, for it *consists* of a study of

characters." A few pages before, repugning, though not disrespectfully, Rümelin's notable criticism that "the characters in Shakespeare are worth a great deal more than the action or plots" (p. 286), he had insisted (p. 288) that "There is in Shakespeare one poetical stream, and it is impossible to set its waters against one another—characters against actions, and the like." Do those judgments consist? One is moved to say that Rümelin was at that point right, and that Croce is wrong both in his attempted rebuttal and in his summary of CORIOLANUS. Shakespeare *is* often unsatisfactory in his handling of plot and action: he is, as Rümelin complains, too often indifferent—from the point of view of leisured and reflective criticism—to verisimilitude in action, profound as is his general sense of verisimilitude in comparison with that of his corrvivals; and this is really a defect, though a subsidiary one, in his "art," strictly considered: though the obvious answer is that Shakespeare was not writing in artistic leisure to fulfil an artistic ideal, but rapidly to make a play that would hold for the theatre. We really do not need to defend him as Croce does: we can afford, Shakespeare can afford, the admission of flaws in work which, as Croce indeed avows, he took with no anxious seriousness about "joining his flats." But on the other hand, some of us would expressly deny that he has thus fallen short in CORIOLANUS, where the total action is for us as æsthetically satisfying as the characterization. It is a play of character *in* action, and determining and determined by action, as truly as are any of the great tragedies. Croce's criticism (p. 219) that "both Coriolanus, the tribunes and

his adversaries are looked upon solely as characters, not as parts and expressions of a sentiment *that should justify one or other or both groups*" (though put by way of denying that we can find in the play the "centre of gravity of his [the poet's] feelings, of his predilections, or of his aspirations") connects with his judgment that the play "lacks complete internal justification." And this seems radically inconsistent with his attitude to the Gervinus-Ulrici procedure of seeking in the plays for a moral purpose, and still more clearly so with his censure of Brandes in regard to *MACBETH*. Is not this, then, we ask, a substantial proof that he has not succeeded in reducing his æsthetic criticism to the strictly scientifico-logical basis which he claims to have reached as against the procedure of the schools or types which he censures as fundamentally wrong in method?

#### IV

Coming now to our main issue, we have to consider narrowly the crux as to the incommensurability of biographical and poetical data, of the "practical" and the poetic personality. Croce prepares his ground by a destructive survey of the biographical record, reaching the decision that it is impossible to write a biography of Shakespeare. "At the most," Mr. Ainslie makes him say, "an arid and *faulty* biographical chronicle can be composed." Wondering why he should say that any biography *must* be faulty, we turn to the original and find that he wrote *lacunosa*, which is reasonable. But does this really dismiss the question? Any sound Life of Shakespeare must confess large *lacunæ*; but is not

this defect one that attends, in different degrees, all biography? To say nothing of its obtrusiveness even in such a biographical century as the nineteenth, it is nearly as marked in the cases of Dante and Cervantes as in that of Shakespeare; and yet who would deny that in all three cases the biography, such as it is, is vital to our æsthetic conception, in that we necessarily think of the work as produced by such a man, so prepared, so circumstanced?

But this, it may be said, is not what Croce denies: he is in effect only denying that anything we can reach by reconsideration of the biography can properly affect the "sympathetic or compendious image of a poet like Shakespeare," which, with the current formulæ defining him, yields for us "the characteristic spiritual attitude of Shakespeare, his poetical sentiment." And this image of a poetic personality Croce seems in effect to contemplate as free from the dubieties which attend the biographical questions on which he has been speaking. Yet his previous and subsequent discussions show that there has been infinite debate over the poetic personality as deduced from the plays: and it is impossible to read him without seeing that he tends to exclude from his æsthetic view a quantity of data which in terms both of his commitments and his implications ought to form part of his subject matter. At one point, indeed, he boldly pronounces (p. 259) that "it is above all in **HENRY VIII**" that the "feeling for justice" recurring in the plays "widens into a feeling towards oneself and others," notably in the dialogue of Katherine and Griffith (not in "the dialogues between Queen Katherine and

her great enemy Wolsey," as Mr. Ainslie obviously makes his author say). Now, that portion of HENRY VIII was long ago assigned by a group of careful English critics, upon scientific grounds and with a wide measure of assent, to Fletcher. If then we are told : "No matter : the pronouncement applies to the author of the passage, whoever he may be, and is an æsthetic, not a biographical proposition," to what do we come? If the special approbation here bestowed is not earned by Shakespeare, but by a lesser poet, what exactly is finally signified by "the image of Shakespeare" and "the poetic sentiment of Shakespeare"? Is "Shakespeare" after all to be only a label broadly equivalent to "Elizabethan and Jacobean drama"?

It becomes imperative to point out to Signor Croce that the difficulty over the problematical elements in the biography of Shakespeare—in which are to be included all the problems as to his real authorship of any of the plays in the Folio—is no more a reason for putting these matters out of our survey than are the many disputes over æsthetic issues a reason for putting aside the task of æsthetic judgment. Nor is the task to be conceived as a hopeless one. Is it not conceivable that the process of re-studying the Canon may not only discipline us better for sound æsthetic inference, but give new light on the æsthetic side by altering at a number of points our notion of what Shakespeare wrote, how he went to work, and how he let pass or modified other men's work?

For some readers this may be so reasonable a question as to leave them surprised that it should be

asked; but Croce really forces it. It is after grimly enumerating the conflicting theories as to the Sonnets (among which he oddly seems to reckon the William Harvey hypothesis one of the most extravagant) that he writes (p. 123):—

“ Passing to the plays, there are and have been discussions *without apparent end*, as to whether **TITUS ANDRONICUS** be an original work or has been patched up by him [Shakespeare]; as to whether **HENRY VI** be all of it his; as to which portions of **HENRY VIII** and of **PERICLES** are his and which Fletcher’s or by other hands; as to whether **TIMON** be a sketch finished by others or a sketch by others finished by Shakespeare; whether and to what extent there persists in **HAMLET** a previous **HAMLET** by Kyd, or by another author; whether certain of the so-called ‘apocrypha,’ such as **ARDEN OF FEVERSHAM** and **EDWARD III**, are on the contrary to be held to be authentic. In like manner, the difficulties connected with the chronology are great, and conjectures numerous. The **DREAM**, for instance, is by many placed in 1590, by others in 1595; **JULIUS CÆSAR**, now in 1606, now in 1599; **CYMBELINE** in 1605 and 1611; **TROILUS AND CRESSIDA** by some in 1599, by others in 1603, by others still in 1609, by yet others resolved into three parts or strata, from 1592 to 1606 and 1607, with additions by other hands. For the majority the **TEMPEST** belongs to the year 1611, but it is by others dated earlier; and as regards **HAMLET** again, in its first form, there are some who believe that it was composed, not by any means in 1602, but between 1592 and 1594.”

When to this very faithful catalogue of the troubles of the Shakespearean canonist there is added the sentence: “And so on, without advantage being taken of the few sure aids offered by stylistic or metrical measurements [*stilometria o metrometria*], as one may prefer to call them,” one quickens in attention with an expectation that the critic will press for the application of those tests. In point of fact the charge is too sweeping. Much appeal has been made to stylistic and metrical tests in these connections; and such tests absolutely

dispose of Swinburne's dating of HAMLET about 1592, which our critic seems to think insusceptible of decisive dismissal. But doubtless much remains to be done on those lines. Is the critic then appealing for such procedure?

In the next sentence he seems on the contrary to assume, apart from previous formal reservations which we shall have to consider in conclusion, that any further inquiry is critically useless. Elsewhere he specifies the tasks of a sound "philology," but does not include this: and here (p. 125) he writes:—

"Now conjectures are of use as heuristic instruments, only in so far as it is hoped to convert them into certainties, by means of the documents, of which they aid in the search and the interpretation. But when this is not possible, they are altogether vain and vacuous, and, *consequently*, *were they* convertible into certainties, would not give the solution or the criterion of solution of the critical problems relating to the poetry of Shakespeare."

The "consequently" here being obviously absurd, we turn to the original and find the argument to run that *if*, converted into certainties, the conjectures will not yield in every [or any?] case the solution or criterion required, then when *not* so convertible they are mere vain imaginings which cannot even supply practical aid to biography. The repetition, and the involution of the argument, even when correctly given, suggest a certain consciousness of inadequate logic. For what is the real issue? To speak of "*the* solution of *the* critical problems relating to *the* poetry of Shakespeare," as if there were only one kind of problem involved, is to obscure all. The æsthetic problems are many, and to decide in advance that no light can be thrown on them by any solution of

any of the practical problems indicated is to be very unwarrantably summary. The implicit postulate: "Were I quite clear as to the exact order of composition and the non-Shakespearean elements in the plays as a whole, I would still be no further on the way to my æsthetic estimate," brings us at once to the decisive question: *Æsthetic estimate of what?* Of the plays as plays or as poetry, or of Shakespeare, of whom we have formed our "image" in terms of his "sentiment"?

To answer that these formal alternatives are really the same thing seems impossible; and to define the issue still more we put the postulate that our image of the poetic Shakespeare must be either evasive or crassly inconsistent if it is wholly unaffected by a judgment as to whether he wrote or did not write all that is ascribed to him. For if we say that we think of him in terms of the great plays and do not care whether he wrote *TITUS ANDRONICUS* and *HENRY VI*, we are really positing a hopeless riddle in æsthetics—a riddle both as to the technique and as to the "sentiment." On the technique Croce is noticeably silent, though one may suspect that for many of us the sheer rhythmic and phrasal charm of Shakespeare's writing is nearly half the secret of his spell. And of course the Italian critic is quite entitled alike to put aside that aspect and to decline to occupy himself with the tedious problems of authenticity, date, and adaptation. But he is really not entitled to argue that the solution of these problems can have no bearing on the æsthetic, unless he definitely surrenders the concept of an "image" of Shakespeare in terms of the poetic sentiment, and is content simply to have a judg-

ment on the sentiment of certain plays, refusing to ask the question how the author of those plays can have written others of which the sentiment, no less than the style, is so immeasurably different. As the case stands, he is in effect not merely justifying himself for leaving untouched one set of problems, but ruling out those problems as not worth settling for the purposes of the "higher criticism"—that is, here, the æsthetic. And on that position some of us must definitely affirm that it is not only an irrational renunciation of relevant knowledge, but an act of bankruptcy in the main process of criticism. To use Croce's own words concerning the biography, "all individualisation is lost," to our thinking, in the concept of a Shakespeare who wrote *everything* in the Folio; and it is just individualisation that we seek in our discrimination of his work. A "poetic personality" which produced the dull brutalities of *TITUS*, the crass malice in the picture of *Joan* in *I HENRY VI*, the puerilities of *HENRY V*, and the crudities of *RICHARD III*, is for us strictly a chimera, which to synthesise in a "sentiment" is impossible. And to clear up those anomalies, if that be possible, will be to have rectified and expanded that biography which our critic finds so arid, but which *must*, whether he wishes it or not, form a qualifying element in his æsthetic conception. That they would in some way condition it he seems to admit in the surprising passage upon which our dispute with him will finally turn; but before coming to that it is necessary to realise clearly the kind of concrete problem that is involved, for this is what is least to be gathered from his abstract argument.

## V

The issue can usefully be brought to a head over Croce's acceptance of *TITUS ANDRONICUS*, where he fully commits himself to the conventional canon:—

“One would think that the tragic theme of *TITUS ANDRONICUS* (which many critics would like to say was not by Shakespeare, but dare not, because here the proofs of authenticity are very strong), was also” [i.e., like the comedies of disguises] “born of a love for literary models, so common in Italy in those days of the *CANACTI* and the *ORBECCCHI*, which were rather imitations of Seneca than of Sophocles and Euripides, and had already inspired plays to the predecessors of Shakespeare, with slaughter for their theme. *What more natural, then, than that Shakespeare as a young man should strike this note? The splendid eloquence with which he adorned the tale is Shakespearean.*” (p. 191.)

It would be unjust to exclaim over that distressing misjudgment as telling of a foreigner's failure to detect English styles, seeing that such a trained English critic as Churton Collins has virtually anticipated it, and Professor Saintsbury seems to agree, though the verdict of “splendid eloquence” is special to Croce among critics of distinction. But on all who acclaim the “splendid eloquence” of *TITUS ANDRONICUS* as Shakespearean we must pass the same criticism: they have been hypnotised by tradition to the extent of assigning to the work of such third-rate poets as Peele and Kyd (aided by Marlowe) the quality of the Master. And what might have saved them from the hallucination is just the application of the tests of style and metrics, certificated as valid by Croce, but here by him entirely ignored. In all likelihood the play is founded on an Italian tragedy of horrors, and was first manipulated by Kyd, it may be with help from Marlowe and Greene,

and afterwards largely rewritten by Peele: at all events, all four hands are there. And most of the alleged "eloquence" is Peele's and Kyd's.

At once Croce, or the English traditionalists for him, will reply that this is vain and vacuous conjecture, which cannot be reduced to certainty, even by the tests which Croce has declared to be "sure." Then we are to assume that they have attained certainty that *Titus* is full of splendid eloquence, penned by Shakespeare. For Croce, the matter appears to be mainly settled by the external "proofs of authenticity," though he is quite sure about the splendid Shakespearean eloquence. Yet in point of fact the sole evidence for Shakespeare's authorship of *Titus*, apart from its inclusion in the Folio with much matter that even the traditionalists mostly admit to be non-Shakespearean, is its inclusion in Meres's list of sixes of tragedies and comedies, in which *Titus* (or some other supposititious play) was in 1598 *needed* to make out the list of six tragedies, even with *Henry IV* ranked as a tragedy, which properly it is not. For the rest, Croce's statement that the critics "dare not" say the play is not Shakespeare's shows inacquaintance with the history of Shakespearean criticism—an inacquaintance that is unexpected, in view of the generally wide range of his reading. So long a series of critics, including Coleridge, have "dared" to pronounce the play non-Shakespearean that one editor has declared that to be the greatly preponderating opinion. And they have the better right to dare, because against the solitary testimony of Meres there stands the fact that the play was thrice published in Shakespeare's life-time (1594, 1600,

1611) *without his name*, though from 1593 onwards that name had selling-power, of which, later, the publishers often availed themselves to ascribe to him plays and poems which nobody now believes him to have written.

And let us now see to what the traditionists are committed, and Croce with them. "What more natural," we are asked, than that the young Shakespeare should have written (about 1593) a play of sickening horrors, with copious slavish plagiarisms from Peele and Kyd, in the end-stopped blank verse of their school, with only 2·5 per cent. of speech-endings on short lines where the certainly early and homogeneous KING JOHN has 12·7 and the DREAM 17·3; and with only 12·0 per cent. of run-on lines where KING JOHN has 17·7; yet with 8·6 per cent. (rising in Act v to 13 and in some scenes to 18 per cent. and more) of double or feminine endings, where the less early KING JOHN has only 6·3 and Part I of HENRY IV only 5·1. Letting all those metristic anomalies pass, the traditionists further accept without misgiving the datum that the young poet who in LUCRECE (printed early in 1594) turned a tale of violation into a long-drawn psychological expiation in which the physical horror is overshadowed, had about the same time detailed to the utmost length of horror a series of hideous atrocities, exhibited as far as possible *on the stage*, in a play of which the interest mainly turns upon them. And "what more natural?" asks Croce: the play was a "literary imitation"; and so were the poems, the VENUS and the LUCRECE!

So, we might add, in a certain degree, were many of the Sonnets. But did the poems or the Sonnets copy wholesale the *style*, the mechanical phrase, the leaden

rhythms of poetically third-rate contemporaries? Do the Sonnets slavishly follow the imagery and the diction of preceding sonneteers as TITUS plagiarises Peele and Kyd and [on the Crocean view] imitates Marlowe? And does Shakespeare do any of these things in the DREAM, or LOVE'S LABOUR'S LOST, or KING JOHN? If these challenges are to be met with a "What more natural?" what objection can there be to crediting Shakespeare not only with all the HENRY VI plays, but with all the apocrypha accepted as his by Schlegel and Tieck? Was not his name on some of their title-pages?

It is quite true that the support of a certain number of critics entitles Croce to deny "certainty" to an assignment of TITUS among several pre-Shakespeareans, but he will have to face the fact that by the same test he lacks "certainty" for his own view. It is in no critical respect better founded than a conjecture; and, contrasted with conjectures which assign given work to Shakespeare or to others upon grounds of style, rhythm, and substance, it is relatively baseless. What is more, it entitles the critic conscious of profound differences in style to deny any such quality as "certainty" to Croce's aesthetic on the technico-literary side. In matters of analytic criticism, conjectures and certainties are not names for generically different orders of opinion such as our certainty about our own actions and our surmises about other people's. They are but names for opinions differentiated as resting on what we hold to be very different degrees of evidence. We may reasonably say we are certain that Shakespeare was a great poet and Peele a

poor one: on such a proposition, at least, most students can readily agree. But if Signor Croce claims to be certain that *Titus* is marked by splendid Shakespearean eloquence he has really no more right to use the term than others of us have to give it to our weighed opinion, reached inductively and verified by all available tests, that the first Act of *Titus* as it stands, and much else, is mainly the work of Peele. His certainty is but an assent to a tradition, and such assents are properly to be termed assumptions. Scientifically speaking, they are no weightier than unverified conjectures so-called; and Croce, who is so drastic about these, is really unduly inclined to the others. Mr. Ainslie once told us of him that in philosophy he "does not like" to have certain widely accepted philosophemes called in question. But he will doubtless admit on challenge that absolutely every philosopheme may fitly be called in question if the challenge be considerately and not ignorantly made. Anyhow, those challenges he was said to bar will certainly be made; and the fit course is to meet them with sheer reason. It is not to be supposed that he will deny this over the issues he has raised in regard to Shakespeare-study; and to the general theoretic issue we now come in conclusion.

## VI

It is over the question as to why Shakespeare did not publish his own plays that our critic first formulates (p. 118) his verdict: "It is clear that these and such-like questions concern the biography *rather than* the

artistic history of Shakespeare." In the next sentence, he makes his admission that "even different things have some relation to one another"; only, however, to proceed to the position that while "the critic and historian of art" would certainly "find it advantageous" to know all about the composition of the plays, inasmuch as he would be saved some perplexities, "he would *gain nothing more* from this advantage," and would have to "beware of the prejudices that such information is apt to cause." "His *judgment* would of necessity be founded, in final analysis, upon intrinsic reasons of an artistic nature, arising from an examination of the works before him." Our objection is that this proposition involves a confusion of ideas, partly by reason of its abstract form.

"Judgment of *what*?" we again ask. To say that our judgment of a literary performance *as such* must turn upon its content is to put a mere critical truism, which Croce can hardly suppose to be disputed. *TITUS* is either good or bad for the true critic whether Shakespeare wrote it or not. But when we find our critic ascribing to that lamentable play "splendid Shakespearean eloquence," we are driven to say that he is departing from the very principle he seems to have laid down, and passed a judgment framed to save the play as Shakespeare's because it appears to be so certificated. Some critics have (quite wrongly as we contend) assigned to him *ARDEN* and parts of *EDWARD III*; and these assignments are to be met by literary tests, involving the production of some evidence that *other* hands did the work. But would anybody, save a German of the period of Schlegel and Tieck, ever have supposed himself to be

doing Shakespeare credit by assigning to him *TITUS* if it had not been given to him by Meres and the Folio? Strongly maintaining the negative, we reply to Croce that the "advantage" to be gained from knowing the whole truth about the composition of the plays would be a new clarity in our notion of Shakespeare as an artist, because we should then definitely know not only wherein his art is embodied but how it evolved. And when our critic tells us that the chronology which would be attained by his own definition will be "not a real or material chronology but an ideal and æsthetic one," we are compelled to answer either that this is positively negated by his own words about "*the chronology*" or that it is a quite fallacious discrimination. What *is* an ideal chronology, or an æsthetic one that is not real? A chronology framed in the manner of Furnivall (whom Croce justly censures, and who is not so reverently regarded by English students as he supposes) would be so describable. Furnivall made a chronology by "links of likeness" and "links of difference" in a fashion that defies every logical principle. But to know, in Croce's words, "*the chronology, the circumstances, the details, the compositions, the re-compositions, the re-castings, and the collaborations of the Shakespearean drama,*" would be precisely to know the real chronology in the strictest sense of the terms; and that is what he granted to be "advantageous." So strange is his apparent abandonment of his own ground in the translation that we have anxiously referred to the original, here as at so many other points; but here Mr. Ainslie is quite faithful.

And the matter is not mended when the critic proceeds thus (p. 120):—

“ Were the authenticity of the works all clearly settled, the critic would be preserved from proclaiming that certain works or parts of works are Shakespeare’s, when they are really, say, Greene’s or Marlowe’s, which is an inexactitude of nomenclature (!), as also is the treating of Shakespeare’s work as being by someone else or anonymous. But this [Croce wrote: *la eventuale*] onomastic inexactitude is already corrected by the presumption [*sottinteso*, subsumption] that the critic has his eye fixed, not on the biographical and practical personage of Shakespeare, but on the poetical personage. He is thus able to face with calmness the danger, *which is not a danger and is extremely improbable*, of allowing to pass under the colours of Shakespeare a work drawn from *the same or a similar source of inspiration*, which stands at an equal altitude with others [*delle altre migliori* in the original], or of adding another work to those of inferior quality and declining value assigned to the same name, because he is differentiating æsthetic value and not title-deeds to legal property.”

What can be said of this passage but that the author has lost hold of his argument and fallen into sheer mystification? In saying that his posited danger is *not* a danger “and is extremely improbable,” he has simply performed a logical somersault. If the critic discusses alien matter as *Shakespeare’s*, which is the case posited, he is letting pass under the colours of Shakespeare what is something else. It is open to him to discuss any play simply as a play; but this is not what he is doing in this book. When he frames the phrase, “*the same or a similar source of inspiration*,” he is vainly striving to escape from his confusion by suggesting alternatively that all that is included in the Folio is worth discussion and that it is all worthy of Shakespeare. The last is precisely what is denied by those who call for discrimination. And all this ostensible preliminary dismissal of

the merely biographical aspect of the subject matter, inconsistent as it already is with all the incidental concrete discussions of authenticity, is wholly cancelled at the close of the essay, thus :—

“ Even when one reads some of the most highly praised pages of the critics of the day upon Shakespeare, so abounding in exquisite refinements, a sort of repugnance comes over one, as though a warning that this is not the genuine Shakespeare. He was less subtle, but more profound, less involved, but more complex, and more great.” [Mr. Ainslie adds: “ than they,” which is not in the original and is not to be understood. The meaning is: “ than the Shakespeare presented by the critics in question.”]

So be it, especially if Croce is thinking of the work of Max J. Wolff ! But all this is a claim to have been discussing “ the genuine Shakespeare ” all along; and, reverting to the assumptions on that head above challenged, we have to protest finally that if you take everything in the Folio to be Shakespeare’s there is no genuine Shakespeare to be found in the world of thought. Nor can we say that the critic might have escaped the crux by simply leaving the problem of authenticities alone. It was a true sub-instinct that led him to acknowledge its inevitability in framing a formula of evituation. It must be faced if we are to have a sound Shakespeare criticism at all. And in facing it we may even hope to find the answer to the question which Croce dismisses as having no bearing on the æsthetic problem—the question why Shakespeare did not publish as his the plays assigned to him as “ property ” in the Folio.

In any case, the matter cannot rest as Croce proposes to leave it. He has but framed—unnecessarily—an openly fallacious procedure to relieve himself of a critical task which he does not see his way to undertake;

falling back on the truism that every æsthetic work is as such to be tried on its æsthetic merits, when the very issue raised by himself was not that, but this, What are the æsthetic merits [or demerits] of the work of Shakespeare, the artist of whom we are expressly invited to form an "image" in terms of *his*—not other people's—"sentiment." And that that is a worthy and a really necessary task is only made more clear by the procedure by which Croce has approached and evaded it, and, we may add, by some of the concrete criticisms which he has hazarded in the course of the approach.



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